

SYDENHAM HOUSE

History and beginnings of restoration

D. J. Henderson January 2, 1967

An eighteenth century house, stone walls a foot and a half thick, on a half-acre lot, with ten big trees, maple and hemlock, 75 feet high, vegetable garden, flower gardens, grape arbor, in Newark, New Jersey. Absolutely ridiculous, impossible. But it is there, on the Old Road to Bloomfield, now called First Street, in the Forest Hills area of North Newark. And it is there because of an odd combination of events.

In 1711, John Sydenham, lately come from England with not much to recommend him, put a ladder against the side of a wealthy farmer's house, located a few miles from the center of the town founded by Robert Treat, about forty-five years earlier. Out of the second floor window and onto the ladder, popped Susannah Handcock, the farmer's daughter. John took her in his arms, helped her down the ladder and they found the proper official to join them in wedlock.

At first, Susannah's father was furious. But he soon calmed down and gave his son-in-law several acres of land. On this land was the little stone saltbox type house her father had built forty years before. It was perfect for John and Susannah.

As John prospered and his descendants prospered, the house was enlarged and the Sydenham acreage grew. In 1860, John Sydenham, fifth of the line, owned most of the land which is now called Forest Hills and a large portion of the area now included in Branch Brook Park. Amelia, his wife, was his guardian, John having lost his mind. When the property was distributed among his children, they immediately sold it to the Forest Hill Improvement Association, retaining only the house and an acre of land.

The last of the Sydenhams, Laura, a maiden lady, principal of a school in Plainfield, business woman, public benefactor, and quite a person in her own right, sold the house in 1925. The occupants failed to maintain it and by 1940 it was near ruin, by virtue of a leaking roof, weather, squirrels and termites. Fortunately, the Historic American Buildings Survey, in 1935, had measured and described its structure in detail and deposited the plans in the Library of Congress.

In the fall of 1954, by pure accident, a man and wife, both hoping some day to find an old house, drove past the Sydenham House. The windows facing the road were boarded up, the roof was evidently in bad shape, various vines had reached the second story windows, the wooden shutters that remained were hanging by one hinge, the grounds were a shambles of weeds and brambles and the end wall, visible from the road, was bulged and cracked from top to bottom. The house did not appear habitable, or inhabited.

The wife wanted to get out of the car, knock on the door, and ask the occupants, if there were any, if they wished to sell the house. But the husband, guided by some sixth sense, objected, and told his wife to go to the Hall of Records and find out the name of the owner. Had he not made this decision, they would not have secured the house. It turned out that the two maiden ladies who lived in the house, did not own it, but had, at various times, told many prospective purchasers that the house was not for sale, or quoted some ridiculously high price to discourage them.

Dorland and Elizabeth Henderson bought the property in November, 1954, letting the two ladies remain, rent free, until April, 1955. During the five month period, they had the roof renewed. Prior to moving in, the Hendersons had only a brief view of the interior of the house, and the rooms were so darkened by boarded-up and vine-covered windows, they could not see much. Only three rooms of fourteen were being lived in, the kitchen and dining-room, and the bedroom above the kitchen. They had noted that the floors and stairs appeared tight and solid, not realizing that they had been thoroughly soaked during every rain because of the leaky roof. But all the doors swung freely and the ridge of the roof did not sag so the Hendersons felt they could manage whatever they might meet.

When they moved in and got a good look at the interior of the house, they found they had underestimated their problem. A pile of stones, about half a ton, lay on the front parlor floor, fallen from the wall, dislodged by water and frost. The floor underneath the stones had rotted. Three weeks after they moved in, an early morning rain storm put a foot of water in the cellar. On the first warm sunny day, the windows of the dining-room were covered with migrating termites and the kitchen floor crawled with them. The ten-inch oak log beams for the dining room floor had been completely cut off from the wall by termites and the floor bounced like a trampoline when they walked on it. Termites had reached the second floor by way of the clay-lime mortar in the stone walls, kept continually moist by the leaking roof. The floor of the pantry, a 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ' x 14' room, was completely disintegrated and a large cupboard had dropped halfway into the cellar. The cupboard itself was in perfect condition, and proved to be an authentic 18th century kas, a museum piece.

Generations of squirrels had lived in the house and it was full of them. In all the rooms, the space between the ceiling and the floor above was filled with squirrels' nests. They ran in and out of the windows of the abandoned bedrooms where panes were broken and through holes they had gnawed at various places in the half-story frame portion of the house.

There were no underground utilities in the Old Road to Bloomfield and the house had no gas connection. The water and sewer lines ran about 150 feet to DeGraw Avenue through the portion of the property that the Hendersons could not afford to purchase. This part was sold to a developer who started building immediately after the Hendersons moved in. Excavation for cellars cut off the Henderson's sewer and water lines, and they had to get a three foot easement through the other property to bring gas, water and sewer connections from DeGraw Avenue. During the summer, they installed a gas-fired hot water heating system.

The mason they hired to re-build the partially collapsed front wall of the parlor charged them an outrageous price and did not do the job satisfactorily. They discharged him, even though it had been planned that he take down and rebuild the entire end wall which was bulged and cracked. They were extremely fortunate to find another mason who was an excellent craftsman, whose charges were reasonable and who understood that the house was being restored, not modernized. The Hendersons hired him in July even though, because of prior commitments, he could not start the job until November. On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, he started to work in a snowstorm.

Excepting plumbing and masonry, the Hendersons have done all the work. Examples of a small part of their work are readily identifiable. About 2000 square feet of floor cleaned and treated with linseed oil and turpentine; 4000 linear feet of joints filled between floor boards (these opened when the floors finally dried out.) Elizabeth reglazed 405 panes of the multi-paned windows. Some of the sashes, 12 paned, were so weathered and fragile, they had to be very carefully handled; a good shake or bump would have destroyed them. Cleaning, treatment with linseed oil and glazing restored their appearance and solidity. Dorland laid a 4" cement floor in the cellar, about 1200 square feet, hand mixed. Ceilings of fourteen rooms were taken down, (together with squirrels' nests), insulated, rock lath put up ready for the mason to plaster at his convenience.

These five projects sound significant but they were a relatively small part of the work of eleven years.
